

Rule of Threes Worksheet

“The rule of three is a writing principle that suggests that a trio of events or characters is more humorous, satisfying, or effective than other numbers in execution of the story and engaging the reader.” -- copyblogger

Three happens to be the smallest number of elements needed to create a pattern. The rule of threes can be used in different ways to create specific effects in your fiction. There’s a reason that plots are often broken into a three act structure, but also consider the following:

Three Part Try Fail Cycle

Either the same character tries to solve a particular problem three different ways, or three different characters take different approaches to the same problem.

Example: Many classic folk tales, including the Three Little Pigs employ this technique. House of straw? Not good enough. House of sticks? Nope. House of bricks? Now that’s the stuff.

Plot problem:

Try 1 (and reason for failure):

Try 2 (and reason for failure):

Try 3 (success!):

Plot Twist

If you want a reader to feel that a plot twist is surprising, yet inevitable, subtly foreshadow it, then drop another only slightly stronger clue about what’s about to happen, then yank the rug out from under your character.

Example: Your protag sees an elderly character taking off a pair of gloves after they’ve obviously been gardening, later the police disclose to the protag that the cat burglar has been wearing gardening gloves (but the character can’t believe that the nice old lady could be a cat burglar), and then the twist reveals that the “gardener” is actually a retired gymnast, wearing makeup to look older than she actually is.

Setup/Foreshadowing:

Reinforcement/Slightly More Obvious Clue:

Payoff/Twist:

Joke

This is the classic trio – setup, anticipation, punch line.

Example: Three stock characters get to make wishes, the first two actually get what they want, but the third winds up disappointed, because he phrased the request poorly.

Setup:

Anticipation:

Punchline:

Running Gag

The running gag uses some of the same elements as the plot twist. Every time the gag comes up, it should be used slightly differently, so that there's a setup, a reinforced expectation and a punch line.

Example: Your protagonist unmasks a character wearing a fake mustache. Later, your character unmasks a character pretending to be the first character (also wearing a fake mustache). Even later, your character attempts to unmask a third character – only to find that that character's mustache is real.

Gag:

First instance:

Second instance:

Third instance:

Repeated Dialogue

Come up with a funny line and think of three different places in the story where the same character will have the opportunity to say it.

Example: "We're friends now." -- A character in the Chocoverse uses this talking about another character who previously attacked her first to explain why she's asking him for help, then to explain why she's standing together with him, then later to stop another character from attacking him.

Line:

First instance:

Second instance:

Third instance:

List

You put three items in a list — only the third item shouldn't match. The humor comes from the unexpected way the third item plays off the two that come before it.

Example: I love summer. You can go to the beach, have a tropical drink, and get eaten by a shark that winds up really drunk.

First item:

Second item:

Third item: (playful twist)

Misquoted List

You take a famous quote that already follows the rule of threes, and you change the third item to something unexpected.

Example: "I came, I saw, I bought ten pounds of chocolate."

Famous Three Item Quote:

Twist: